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Vivir bien governance in Bolivia: chimera or attainable utopia?

Abstract The notion of *vivir bien* – a complex set of ideas, worldviews, and knowledge deriving from indigenous movements, activist groups, and scholars of indigeneity – has become an overarching principle for policy-making and state transformation processes in Andean countries. This article analyses the contradiction between the principle of *vivir bien* as an egalitarian utopian category and its bureaucratic application in Bolivia to state formation processes and power dynamics involving social movements. It argues that while discursively grounded on such egalitarian principles as reciprocity and rotating authority, its implementation entails bureaucratic propensities to centralize power and authority. Instead of decolonizing the state, it is used to discipline the masses.

Keywords: *vivir bien*; decolonization; power and authority; bureaucratic politics; state formation; Bolivia

Introduction

On February 2016, Bolivians voted in a referendum to decide on a constitutional change that would allow Evo Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president, to stand as presidential

candidate for a fourth term.¹ The incumbent head of state is still widely endorsed by the Bolivian electorate. His electoral win in January 2006 symbolized victory for a wide array of social movements, indigenous groups, and peasant unions and was perceived by many as the beginning of a new era of redefining politics more inclusively. High hopes were expressed for a radical, democratic, state-transformation project based on indigeneity. Conceptually grounded in such egalitarian principles as reciprocity and rotation of authority, the notion of *vivir bien* (living well) – a complex set of ideas, worldviews, and knowledge deriving from the diverse histories and experiences of indigenous movements, activist groups, and scholars of indigeneity – exemplifies this critical enterprise. *Vivir bien* became the backbone of state policy-making. Furthermore, the constitution, approved in 2009 in a complicated and contested process in the Constituent Assembly and parliament, defined it as the ‘ethical-moral principle of the plural society’.² One part of the democratisation project inscribed in the new constitution was that president and vice-president can only run for two terms; however, as noted, attempts to change the ruling soon appeared. Although Bolivians voted against the constitutional change, the relationship between the leaders’ eagerness to retain power and democratizing and decolonizing social movement rhetoric remains problematic. Is *vivir bien* governance a chimera or an attainable utopia?

This article analyses the contradiction between the principle of *vivir bien* as an egalitarian utopian category and its bureaucratic application to state formation processes and power dynamics involving social movements. It examines whether radical democratic and decolonial political ideals of alternative forms of governance, or what I call ‘governing pluralities’ – that is, plural political formulations governing both the state and indigenous territorial arrangements – are being translated into bureaucratic state practices. Or is the state apparatus, unintentionally perhaps, effectively taming the active agents of pluralism – social movements and indigenous groups – by converting them into ‘disciplined masses’? While considerable academic interest has developed in the concept of *vivir bien* / *buen vivir*,³ critical ethnographic examination of what is concretely done in its name *within the state apparatus* is scarce. There are many important ethnographic works on indigeneity and decolonization from the perspective of indigenous movements and communities;⁴ also well researched are the material conditions of state transformation, especially the contradictory relationship between *vivir bien* rhetoric and the extensive extractive economy.⁵ Yet, although ethnographies of indigeneity and questions of resources are crucial when examining whether state governance based on *vivir bien* principles is

a utopia, this article focuses on a less studied, yet equally critical aspect: the complexities of state bureaucracy, governance, and executive powers.

The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2009 among Bolivian ministers, public servants, indigenous activists, and development experts concerning their perceptions and actions related to the notion of *vivir bien* as state policy.⁶ The material is complemented by critical engagement with recent policy documents⁷ and academic studies⁸ that connect with the subject. I argue that the governing regime's transformational agenda faces severe challenges as the new indigenous policy formations collide with the existing bureaucratic-institutional structures of the Bolivian nation-state. These challenges are reflected in dual tendencies within the state: in new discursive and ideological commitments to decolonize it through the notion of *vivir bien*, and in bureaucratic propensities to centralize its instruments of power and authority. Recent battles over constitutional change come to light not as exceptions but as manifestations of the long-term functioning of power already visible at the time of my fieldwork.

The following section introduces conceptual and theoretical considerations important when discussing policy-making, state formation, and decolonization processes, followed by description of the role of *vivir bien* as – ideally – one of democratizing and decolonizing state policy. The third section examines contradictory governing practices such as the corporatism developing in relations between the ruling regime and social movements, and the centralization of the state: two indications of bureaucratic and authoritarian forms of rule in stark contrast with discourses of democratization and decolonization which also raise possibilities for critical challenge to the governing regime's agendas.

The coloniality of Latin American state formation processes

The term utopia is generally associated with an ideal community or society in which egalitarian and pluralistic principles prevail. Initiatives aiming at social transformation outside capitalism through local, participatory, ecological alternatives, and radical collective practices have become more common globally. Often termed 'nowtopia'⁹ by activists and scholars, in distinction to the distant, futurist implications of utopia, attempts to construct concrete

alternative practices in the Global North include various forms of solidarity economy, co-housing, and alternative banks, to name a few.¹⁰ The Global South hosts the circulation of locally rooted cultural concepts including *ubuntu* in Southern Africa, *swaraj* in India, Buddhist concepts elsewhere in Asia, and the notion of *vivir bien*, emanating from the Andes, which is associated with constructing new politics from below. However, what started as a complex of locally meaningful practices and ways of living and a political denominator in decades of indigenous struggles for lands and territories has now been co-opted by the Bolivian nation-state. My question is whether and to what extent this egalitarian utopian category can be translated into ‘nowtopia’, concrete alternative practices in the present, *within* the nation-state structure.

In recent decades the legitimacy of the study of the state has been challenged both in world politics and theoretically.¹¹ The first challenge relates to economic globalization and the intensified global flows of people, capital, commodities, technology, and ideas over and across the borders of nation-states.¹² While the state has lost a measure of regulatory capacity, the intensification of state-led extractive economies and the political rise of Left-wing regimes in Latin America indicate that further analyses are needed. In respect of the theoretical challenge, Foucault has redirected attention from the study of state structures and institutions to the wider functioning of power.¹³ This locates us in a different terrain to the Weberian neostructuralist explanations or neo-Marxist understandings of the state which were previously dominant within political theories of state formation despite the growing significance of rational-choice theory¹⁴ – all differing from Foucault’s notions which attend both to external state structures and internalized forms of power.¹⁵ For Foucault, power is everywhere, helping us to see that progressive governments and indigenous peoples also engage with it. Indigenous peoples are not solely passive victims of state coercion or external neoliberal oppression; rather, they are active agents of change with their own internal contestations, power struggles, and hierarchies. This understanding of power, blurring the boundaries between state and society, enables an examination of the role played by Bolivian social movements in state centres that is free of the determinist dichotomy of proletarian-run society versus perpetuation of a bourgeois ruling class in the guise of movement activists.

Alongside governmentality, Foucault categorized other forms of rule: discipline and sovereign authority. Disciplinary institutions included prisons, state bureaucracies and other institutions in which people are under the constant exercise of rule. While governmentality

represents the productive dimension of power which aims at improving people's wellbeing, discipline is about direct control, punishment, and a negative relationship of power.¹⁶ Instead of overseeing relations between people and things as resources for the political economy of the state, the state is rather associated with, and typified by, representation of the ruling regime and governing bureaucracies.¹⁷ Sovereignty, for its part, 'conceives of state power in the form of a person (an individual or collective decision maker), whose decisions form a system of orders and prohibitions that direct and constrain social action'.¹⁸ However, 'at some historical conjunctures a sovereign's might is best confirmed – and secured – by ensuring the wellbeing of the population and augmenting its prosperity'.¹⁹ In fact, Li has argued that because of violent colonial histories, racial making of differences, and transnational capitalism, different forms of power tend to manifest themselves in awkward and contradictory articulations in the Global South.²⁰

When indigenous discourses become state policy, new conceptual tools are needed for their analysis. Theoretical discussions of coloniality and decolonization of the state resonate with Latin American decolonial thinking,²¹ with salient figures such as Walter Mignolo establishing a critical dialogue with Foucault's thinking on power and knowledge relations.²² Coloniality can be defined as 'a term that encompasses the transhistoric expansion of colonial domination and the perpetuation of its effects in contemporary time'.²³ These effects include 'long-standing patterns of power that...define culture, labour, intersubjective relations and knowledge production'.²⁴ While colonialism as a regime of systematic political and economic control and violence has long since been dismantled in Latin America, coloniality, as Quijano suggests, is still everywhere.²⁵ This scholarly school of thought perceives decolonial projects, although often emerging within modernity or at its borders, also as vehicles for confronting and transforming it.²⁶ For instance, processes leading to the formulation of the notion of *vivir bien* as an alternative paradigm for state formation can be perceived in this light. According to Escobar, decolonization confronts two issues: first, transnational capitalism and neoliberal development thinking; and second, 'discourses, practices, structures, [and] institutions...that have arisen over the last few hundred years out of...cultural and ontological commitments of European societies'.²⁷ In the following, I describe and explain the empirical process of decolonizing the Bolivian state through progressive policies based on indigenous ideas.

***Vivir bien* as decolonizing state policy**

The notion of *vivir bien* emerged as the backbone of Bolivian state policies with the launch of the National Development Plan (*Plan Nacional de Desarrollo: Bolivia Digna, Soberana, Productiva, y Democrática para Vivir Bien*, NDP) in 2006.²⁸ While it nearly disappeared in *Rumbo a una Bolivia Líder: 2010-2015 Programa de Gobierno* – the subsequent governmental programme which gave priority to grand scale developmental paradigms and state-led industrialization initiatives²⁹ – *vivir bien* has re-emerged in the 2016–2020 policy guideline (*Plan de Desarrollo Económico y Social en el Marco del Desarrollo Integral para Vivir Bien*). Stated to originate from indigenous, afro-Bolivian, and peasant ideas, worldviews, and knowledges, state policy defines *vivir bien* as ‘an alternative civilizational and cultural horizon to capitalism and modernity’.³⁰ It draws on the assumed strengths of previously marginalized indigenous peoples – solidarity, collective wellbeing, sense of community, identity politics, and ecological knowledge and sustainability – as opposed to a ‘culture of individualism, mercantilism and capitalism that is based on the irrational exploitation of humanity and nature’.³¹ *Vivir bien* as an egalitarian utopian category is also present in the constitution where such conceptualizations as *suma qamaña*, *ñandereko*, *teko kavi*, *ivi maraei* and *qhapaj ñan* – often understood as the multiple indigenous origins of the Spanish umbrella term *vivir bien* – are defined as the ethical-moral principles for the Bolivian society.³²

Gudynas has called the state adoption of *vivir bien* discourse a process of domestication.³³ However, in a sense, the way in which state policy and legislation portrays *vivir bien* responds to Canessa’s remark that indigeneity can be perceived as ‘a discourse of injustice that can draw on positive tropes of past civilizations, a relationship to the natural environment, and a sense of authenticity that can speak to a broad group of Bolivians who feel dispossessed and colonized by powerful global economic and political forces’.³⁴ In a policy event organized by the Vice-Ministry of Planning and Coordination, the *Consejo Nacional de Ayllus y Markas del Qullasuyu* (CONAMAQ) – an Andean indigenous organization which previously supported the governing regime but is now divided³⁵ – defined *suma qamaña* as the recovery of indigenous self-governance over *ayllus*: traditional territorial units of the Aymara in the Andean highlands.³⁶ Consequently, they tied the use of indigenous terminologies to their long-term political struggles for lands, territories, and self-governance. Historically speaking, living in

ayllus was based on reciprocal patterns of exchange in terms of social organization, political system, and the economy.³⁷ According to Xavier Albó, a Jesuit priest and public intellectual in Bolivia expert in linguistics and anthropology, the notion of *suma qamaña* embodies numerous practices of reciprocity: community labour, exchange of gifts and services, the organization of community celebrations and rituals, and the elaborate rotational system of positions of authority and decision making.³⁸ While different kinds of hierarchies have always existed in indigenous communities,³⁹ the continuous rotation of authority has generally been assumed to level social tensions and inequalities and these principles should also be an integral part of *vivir bien* thinking at the state level.

Indeed, the *vivir bien* policy framework is coupled to new perceptions of the state. The NDP argues that a process of decolonization of state structures, institutions, and practices is needed in order to eradicate characteristics of its coloniality such as ‘liberal and neoliberal modernization’, domination, ethnic exclusion, and racism. As an example, the NDP notes that the constitution of state executive powers has colonial roots, suggesting that alternatives must be found for such institutions.⁴⁰ Social movements, indigenous peoples, and peasant unions are portrayed as the primary agents in restructuring political power. The plan states that the main goal of decolonization is to strengthen the incorporation of multiethnic and plurinational forms of governance and, subsequently, democratization.⁴¹ Similar claims are made in the 2016–2020 plan, which defines the process of decolonization as the elimination of racial and cultural discrimination and the strengthening of indigenous knowledge and ideas. The aim of decolonization, it declares, is to enhance ‘the construction of communitarian socialism for living well’.⁴²

The constitution defines Bolivia as a plurinational state (*Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia*), referencing long-term indigenous struggles to recover governance of colonized lands, territories, and natural resources. The plurinational state, therefore, refers to a decolonized and decentralized state that comprises a conglomeration of various *naciones* (nations), autonomous indigenous territories, municipalities, and regions.⁴³ According to Vice-President García Linera, the aim of constructing the plurinational state is to ‘allow dominated and excluded ethnic groups to have their share of...structures of political power’.⁴⁴ The NDP, for example, emphasizes that the aim of the governing regime is to enhance the participation, deliberation, and emancipation of indigenous peoples and plural social movements *both* as leaders of the structures of state governance *and* within their own nations.⁴⁵ Here I advance the argument

that the construction of the notion of *vivir bien* as an alternative state discourse contributes – ideally – to the creation of new forms of ‘governing pluralities’, that is, plural political formulations governing both the state and indigenous territorial arrangements. The democratization would – ideally – occur at these two levels. The question to which I turn next becomes whether, and how, social-movement regimes can implement, in practice, new, more democratic forms of power.

Coloniality strikes back: The intensification of bureaucratic and authoritarian forms of power?

The following sections examine whether decolonizing and democratizing political discourses related to new forms of governing are being translated into practice or whether the state bureaucracy as a disciplinary power is rather attempting to convert social movements and indigenous communities into what I call ‘disciplined masses’. The first two sections discuss the integration of social movements into state governance and, the third, the centralization of the state: all characteristics that demonstrate how the colonial, centralizing state bureaucracy is striking back against the ideals of change.

Institutionalizing social movements

During my fieldwork in late 2008 and early 2009, it was common to hear a social movement representative state that social movements were in power. Leonilda Zurita, a coca-union leader, former senator, and president of the *Confederación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas Indígenas Originarias de Bolivia ‘Bartolina Sisa’* (CNMCIQB-BS) – one of the five key social movements of an alliance supporting President Morales – declared to me:

We are part of the government; we are part of the political instrument; we are pushing this process forward with President Evo Morales...As our president was born...from social movements, we oblige him... As he has emerged from the people, he has to stand by the people and by his social movements...When we demand, he complies.⁴⁶

Another representative from the *Confederación Sindical de Comunidades Interculturales Originarias de Bolivia* (CSCIOB)⁴⁷, the second peasant union in the alliance, agreed and stated that, in his opinion, the country was governed by the Bartolinas, the CSCIOB, the *Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia* (CSUTCB), the *Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia* (CIDOB), and the CONAMAQ. Indeed, he talked to me about the process of change in the first person plural: ‘we’. He declared that ‘we have been able to consolidate the process’; and that ‘we...are changing and transforming the country’.⁴⁸ Since the mid-1990s, these three peasant unions and two indigenous organizations had played a role, to varying degrees, in the foundation and upsurge of the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) – Morales’ political party – as a noteworthy political contender. In 2005, they formulated a mutual cooperation agreement, the so-called *Pacto de Unidad*, with other social groups and unions to support Morales and the MAS in the national elections and, later, to enhance the processes of the Constituent Assembly, which was supposed to symbolize the first example of new, participatory, and radically democratic forms of decision-making.

However, attempts have been made by the governing regime to manage social movements in response to increasing provocation from Morales’ own support base.⁴⁹ One manifestation is the aim to unite social movements into a civil-society decision-making body, the CONALCAM (*Coordinadora Nacional por el Cambio*), established in 2007 to defend the process of change. In addition to the five social movements already mentioned, it included organizations such as the union of female domestic labourers, the union for retired workers, and the Cochabamba-based union of the users of irrigation waters. One of the leaders of the CSCIOB told me that the aim of the CONALCAM was to function as the nexus between social movements and the government in such a way that the political and economic issues of the country can be jointly negotiated and planned. In his opinion, it was a channel through which social movements could make proposals to the government on what it should do and how it should be done because, as he noted, ‘the CONALCAM makes the president aware of his errors and of the problems of the country’.⁵⁰ Indeed, the CONALCAM functions in direct cooperation with the president and various political figures of the MAS. In this sense, social movements have achieved a role amidst the executive powers in influencing state policies. Although loosely institutionalized, the Bolivian media, for example, argued in the earlier days of the process that the CONALCAM has equal, or even greater, power than ministers in the executive.⁵¹ Indeed, this vision has been shared by the president who has expressed the view

that the CONALCAM should become the highest authority for making political decisions, even ranking above the ministerial cabinet.⁵²

While boundaries between state actors and movement activists are blurred, both the composition of the governing MAS and the establishment of the CONALCAM assign social movements a role in the rule of the state. Researchers have conceptualized this movement-based regime with phrases such as ‘indigenous popular hegemony’⁵³ and ‘state acting like movement’.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, although the involvement of social movements in running the state can be considered a sign of decolonization and democratization, it is important to examine whether this form of institutionalization of movement actions can be seen as a way to co-opt and control social movements. This critical issue is examined in the following section.

Corporatism as the taming of movement actions

The CONALCAM has been said to function as ‘officialdom’s loyal “shock troops”’.⁵⁵ One leader of the Bolivian Miners’ Union, for example, complained to me that the CONALCAM lacks independence as it is ‘a group of social organizations affined to the government’.⁵⁶ As suggested earlier, the CONALCAM, as the coordinating body of a large number of social movements, has the potential to make indigenous and grassroots voices heard by the executive. The more dangerous implication of the institutionalization of social movements is that of harnessing social movements to the agendas of the governing regime and silencing critical political voices. There is a long history in Bolivia of perceiving indigenous populations as potentially dangerous and, consequently, as targets of bureaucratic control and coercion, to be drawn into state mechanisms through patron-client networks, corporatist arrangements, and other forms of co-option.⁵⁷ The relationship between the executive and the CONALCAM somewhat resembles co-governing arrangements introduced during the 1952 nationalist revolution, when the most visible effect of the emerging alliance between the national bourgeoisie and the popular classes was ‘to institutionalize the revolution by a corporatist system of party control over civil society...’⁵⁸

Corporatism can be analysed from two perspectives. According to one, it ‘opens up institutional areas of the state to the representation of organized interests of civil society’.⁵⁹ The other possibility is that through corporatism, the state penetrates society and establishes control over it; that is, there occurs ‘conquest and subordination by the state of organizations

of the civil society'.⁶⁰ Lazar has suggested that this dual character of corporatist arrangements has been integral to Bolivian politics.⁶¹ On the one hand, movements, unions, and organizations have tended to represent a potential danger to the stability of the governing regime through contentious politics. Therefore, they have often been included in direct negotiations with it. Tapia has referred to this as an alternative form of democracy consisting of more than voting: it included direct participation in governmental decision-making in deliberative arenas that co-governing arrangements had created.⁶² On the other hand, 'collective organizations can certainly be the means by which Bolivian governments control their citizens'.⁶³ This has even been recognized by some of the political leaders of MAS, with one of the vice-ministers, for example, complaining to me that the role of the CONALCAM seemed to be leaning towards *caudillismo*, referencing 19th-century Latin American experiences of authoritarian leadership. Furthermore, he implied that the aim of the CONALCAM was to defend governmental political goals, keeping social movements peaceful by controlling them from within.⁶⁴

Rightfully, the criticism has been made that rather than democratization being produced by indigenous ideas, power has been centralized and legitimized through the nominal participation of social movements. One of the technical experts at Morales' executive responsible for translating *vivir bien* policy discourses into bureaucratic practices raised this contradictory role:

I am confused whether this government promotes dialogue or whether it wants to impose things. The inclusion of social sectors, such as peasant unions and indigenous organizations, that did not participate in politics before makes one think that the government is interested in dialogue. On the other hand, those who do not agree with the government are judged to be enemies that have to be destroyed at any cost.

This indicates that, alongside promoting increased movement participation, also on the agenda are taming and disciplining criticism, confrontation, and challenges to the governing regime.

In addition to disciplining pro-government movements internally, there have been signs that social movements co-opted by the governing regime were used to suppress other civil society movements. In 2011, for example, when the Bolivian Workers' Union organized strikes to demand higher wage increases, the governing regime 'pitted the pro-government social movements of the CONALCAM, primarily the peasant unions, *cocaleros* and "Bartolinas", against the workers' movements'.⁶⁵ Conflicts over the Isiboro Sécure Indigenous Territory and

National Park (*Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécure, TIPNIS*) between the state, peasant unions, and indigenous groups further exemplify these tendencies.⁶⁶ Plans by the executive to intervene in indigenous territories through large-scale development projects such as road building and resource extraction – forms of external penetration in which the state has replaced transnational agencies and corporations – were resisted by various indigenous organizations, while pro-government peasants' unions and coca-growers (the group in which President Morales originally rose to prominence as union leader and activist) defended the plans. The state captured the viewpoint of what Rivera Cusicanqui calls 'strategic ethnicity',⁶⁷ used by peasant migrants and coca-growers to promote their political goals for lands and livelihoods in the name of indigeneity, in opposition to local indigenous groups' rights to territories and self-governance. The executive was struggling with the unresolved tension between the need to improve peoples' life conditions through development projects – sometimes interpreted as a pragmatic stance⁶⁸ – and its commitment to respect indigenous territories and environmental values.

The conflict which resulted – and which, to an extent, still continues – was, as Burman has suggested, a defining moment in the relation between social movements and the government.⁶⁹ Organizations such as the CONAMAQ and the CIDOB, historically constituted on the basis of indigeneity, started to withdraw from alliances with peasant unions within the *Pacto de Unidad*⁷⁰ – and the CONALCAM. This resulted in accentuating internal divisions in the CONAMAQ and the CIDOB: ongoing contestation and potential rupture in which pro-government activists are trying to displace their more critical counterparts. Ultimately, as a result of the conflict, the state-led 'hegemonic project of indigeneity was explicitly opposed by a heterogeneous counter-project being articulated by many different actors'.⁷¹ The TIPNIS conflict brought to the surface the spirit of indigenous rebellions and struggles, or what Rivera Cusicanqui calls 'tactical ethnicity'⁷² as opposed to 'strategic ethnicity' – despite being opposed to a governing regime whose policies and legislation claim ownership over indigenous ideas.

Personalization of Power

Tensions have been felt within the governing regime, too. Although committed defenders of social movements and indigenous organizations, some ministers and vice-ministers brought up their own contradictory experiences within state mechanisms. The Vice-Minister of Planning

and Coordination, Noel Aguirre, for example, noted to me that although state discourses and policy ideas are new, state structures and institutions seem to retain their own logic. Aguirre was conscious of the contradictions when he stated:

Although many of us know what is meant by the notion of *vivir bien*, from time to time it betrays us. Colonialism [*colonialismo*] strikes back, and starts to function in our heads and bodies... It is an eternal battle...to make a difference. When we are constructing the new paradigm, sometimes the old [habits] come back because they are easy [to implement].⁷³

In this statement, Aguirre identified previous practices with the colonality of the state. Yet he also noted that the same colonality lives on as internalized ways of being and doing in those who are trying to work with the new terminologies and epistemologies. MAS Member of the Constituent Assembly and ex-vice-Minister of Strategic Planning, Raúl Prada, mentioned that it was unfortunate that when the MAS entered the government, 'it accepted the legacy of the old state, its ancient practices, architecture, norms, and behaviour'. Prada was particularly disappointed by the evolution of the Constituent Assembly, which, in his opinion, had initially embodied a new form of radical democracy, or 'plurality of multitudes', as he called it, as opposed to the 'colonizing state'. The ideal of the plurinational state, as Prada suggested, was that radical-democratic and self-managing projects like the Constituent Assembly would supplant traditional state structures and institutions. Another aspect of the decentring of state executive powers, Prada continued, related to the enhancement of self-governing by autonomous indigenous nations.⁷⁴ However, the Constituent Assembly failed to function due to contestations and power struggles both within the MAS and between the MAS and its political opponents, and negotiations over the restructuring of the constitution were shifted to the parliament. Instead of transforming the state through the logic of social movements and indigenous ideas, Prada concluded dejectedly that 'the MAS had been swallowed by the state'.⁷⁵ The disciplinary boundary between the state and social movements that had been shaken by the rise of social movements to the corridors of state power were being re-constructed by the movement-based regime itself.

Traditionally, public policy decision-making in Bolivia has been executed from top down, and from abroad, through the influence of International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and development agencies, without recognising a variety of local demands and needs.⁷⁶ The

technical expert mentioned above, however, suggested that these traditions continue to operate:

Because of the institutional instability, Bolivian institutions depend a lot on their leaders. Before, there was a clear dependency on the president and on the political power of ministers but now, as the MAS is a new organization that is not well consolidated, there are very few well-known figures on whom the ministries could rely...Therefore, decision-making on many issues falls to the president and two or three ministers that have political power and influence.⁷⁷

The implication here is that the Bolivian state is easily identified with specific political figures. The president is often understood as the personification of the state and national patron and consequently, 'political leadership in Latin America has often tended to be authoritarian, with the political leader exercising a great deal of power and control'.⁷⁸ The case of Evo Morales is a curious extension of this phenomenon as, although he is the head of the state, he rose to power through the social movements and peasant unions. One technical expert at the World Bank actually stated to me that, in his opinion, the 'government is Evo': 'He has a very strong role in the executive,' I was told, 'but as the union leader, he has a lot of capacity to negotiate within social movements and peasant unions.'⁷⁹

Although Morales has a lot of room for manoeuvre at the intersections of state and society, the personalization of state power certainly contradicts the ideals of indigenous governance. Classical anthropological accounts have claimed that in indigenous political organizations authority 'is multiple and shifting, rather than focused on a particular figure'.⁸⁰ Furthermore, they note that obligatory annual rotation of community leaders imposes 'extreme limitations to power'.⁸¹ In line with this, Felix Patzi, the former Minister of Education in Morales' government and current Governor of La Paz Department, suggested to me that in order to avoid the centralization of power, political leaders at the level of the state executive should rotate, as they do in 'communitarian democracy'.⁸² Given that Morales and García Linera have tried to opt for a fourth concurrent presidential term, this is certainly not the case at present.

Since a significant part of the Bolivian population voted against the Constitutional Reform, thus resulting in Morales' first electoral defeat during his ten years of presidency, it appears that there is a call for a more democratic system with rotation of power. There are, however, strong voices within the social movements supporting Morales' leadership –

especially in peasant unions such as the CSUTCB, the CSCIOB, and the Bartolinas – that argue that his symbolic leadership needs to remain intact for longer; indeed, the Bartolinas have recently started another political campaign to modify the constitution to favour Morales' re-election.⁸³ The justification behind this is that many social movements and grassroots organizations fear – quite understandably when looking at Bolivia's turbulent history – that losing institutional stability would also lead into losing such state-generated initiatives as social reforms and indigenous autonomies that have generally been perceived as beneficial to them.

Yet the result can also be interpreted as marking the emergence of new actors and new spaces which could incentivize *vivir bien* practices, bringing them more into line with their decolonizing character. Interestingly, the sectors that did not accept Constitutional Reform were very varied: ranging from racist, right-wing political opposition through indigenous populations to those who think that Morales' regime has *not* sufficiently implemented Left-wing or indigenous politics. New actors at the latter end of the spectrum included youth groups, Left-wing intellectuals, union leaders, and politicians and thinkers who had previously worked for the MAS.⁸⁴ It is most likely that it also included some of the same urban ecological, feminist, and indigenous activists who can be identified as having aligned with indigenous causes during the TIPNIS conflict.⁸⁵ The dynamic between the state and these diverse strands of actors will constitute a crucial element in the future of political affairs in Bolivia.

Conclusions

Using data from the operations of the Bolivian state and local social movements, this article has asked provocatively whether state governance according to the principles of *vivir bien* is a chimera or an attainable utopia. Response to this question is dual. On the one hand, real, passionate efforts are being made by social movements, indigenous organizations, various kinds of activists, and academic scholars to construct alternative future horizons based on radically decolonizing and democratizing ideas of authority and power. Consequently, the idea of the governed becoming governors is visible both in indigenous struggles for self-determination and, at least discursively, in state policies. To govern in the name of *vivir bien*, therefore, signifies governing through plural political formations. The state and its governing

tools – policies and legislation – have become instruments of change: through policy making and constitutional reforms, ‘governing pluralities’ are, paradoxically, using the state as a channel to change how the state is governed. The nation-state that matters is a radically altered one of plural formations: one that is both an object and an instrument of change.

However, the data discussed here has demonstrated that instead of instituting the blurring of state-society boundaries, the process of transformation has resulted in stiffening existing categories. Rather than being cherished as empowered subjects of change, social movements, indigenous groups, and radical activist networks have increasingly become targets of governmental discipline and control. As a result, it seems possible that the state that claims to function through democratizing principles is actually solidifying existing hierarchical governing structures, or even creating new ones. Although the institutionalization of social movements may enhance movement participation in state affairs, co-governing arrangements also function to discipline and control social movements by their co-option into state institutional structures. This implies the taming of radical movement politics and the centralization of bureaucratic power and authority. Consequently, the state apparatus is empowering itself to control the masses by producing and maintaining the imaginary boundary between the state and social forces.

An increased degree of self-criticism and self-reflexivity is needed for any radical decolonizing project that tries to transcend coloniality. The re-emergence of contentious politics in Bolivia has showed that despite governmental attempts to co-opt it, a critical challenge to the repressive forms of rule is constantly present – even within, and against, a governing regime that operates in the name of indigeneity.

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Notes

1. McNelly, "The Latest Turn".
2. Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, *Constitución*, 14.
3. The notion of *buen vivir* is more common in Ecuador. Farah and Vasapollo, *Vivir Bien*; Gudynas, "Buen Vivir"; Merino, "An Alternative"; Schavelzon, *Plurinacionalidad y Vivir Bien*; Vega, *Errancias*; Villalba, "Buen Vivir vs Development"; and Walsh, "Development as Buen Vivir".
4. Burman, "Now We Are Indígenas"; Canessa, "New Indigenous Citizenship"; Canessa, "Conflict, Claim and Contradiction".
5. Lalander, "The Ecuadorian Resource Dilemma"; Lalander, "Rights of Nature"; Molero and Antolín, "Development Strategy"; Ranta, "Toward Decolonial Alternative"; Revette, "This Time it's Different"; and Webber, *From Rebellion to Reform*.
6. This article is based on more extensive PhD research. See Ranta, *In the Name*. The overall data consisted of 54 individual interviews, 6 group interviews, policy documents, and six months of participant observation in the offices and corridors of state institutions. More specifically, I participated in and observed development policy events, seminars, and meetings. Access was partly facilitated by earlier work experience and contacts made in an indigenous NGO and UN office in 2001 and 2002, when I lived in Bolivia for a total of 13 months.
7. Movimiento al Socialismo MAS-IPSP, *Rumbo a una Bolivia Líder*; Ministerio de Planificación al Desarrollo, *Plan de Desarrollo Económico*.
8. Burman, "Now We Are Indígenas"; Gudynas, "El Malestar Moderno"; Lalander, "Rights of Nature"; Rivera Cusicanqui, *Mito y Desarrollo*.
9. Carlsson, *Nowtopia*.
10. Demaria et al., "What is Degrowth?".
11. Steinmetz, "Introduction".
12. Sharma and Gupta, "Introduction"; and Trouillot, *Global Transformations*.
13. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*.
14. Steinmetz, "Introduction".
15. Mitchell, "Society, Economy".
16. Ferguson and Gupta, "Spatializing States", 115.
17. Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*, 274.
18. Mitchell, "Society, Economy", 86.
19. Li, *The Will to Improve*, 12.
20. Li, *The Will to Improve*, 12–17.
21. Escobar, "Latin America"; Mignolo and Escobar, *Globalization*; Moraña et al., *Coloniality at Large*; Quijano, "Coloniality of Power".
22. Alcoff, "Mignolo's Epistemology".

23. Moraña et al., "Colonialism and its Replicants", 2.
24. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power*, 128.
25. Quijano, "Coloniality of Power".
26. Mignolo, "Introduction", 19; See also, Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*.
27. Escobar, "Latin America", 9.
28. I have discussed this process more in detail in Ranta, "Toward Decolonial Alternative".
29. Movimiento al Socialismo MAS-IPSP, *Rumbo a una Bolivia Líder*.
30. Ministerio de Planificación al Desarrollo, *Plan de Desarrollo*, 4.
31. Ministerio de Planificación al Desarrollo, *Plan de Desarrollo*, 4.
32. Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, *Constitución*. In Ecuador, the *kichwa* notion of *sumak kawsay* (*buen vivir* in Spanish) is rather defined as a set of rights, see, for example, Lalander, "The Ecuadorian Resource Dilemma"; Walsh, "Development as Buen Vivir".
33. Gudynas, "El Malestar Moderno", 198.
34. Canessa, "New Indigenous Citizenship", 205.
35. For an elaborate account of the reasons behind the rupture, see Burman, "Now We Are Indígenas".
36. CONAMAQ, "La Reconstitución".
37. Harris, "The Dead"; Murra, *La Organización Económica*.
38. Author interview, January 28, 2009.
39. Klein, *A Concise History*.
40. República de Bolivia, *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo*, 7–8.
41. República de Bolivia, *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo*, 4–5.
42. Ministerio de Planificación al Desarrollo, *Plan de Desarrollo*, 3.
43. Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, *El Estado del Estado*, 485.
44. García Linera, "Estado Plurinacional".
45. República de Bolivia, *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo*, 7–8.
46. Author interview, October 28, 2008.
47. The CSCIOB was previously known as the *Confederación Sindical de Colonizadores de Bolivia*. It represents, first and foremost, coca-growing migrants, who originate from the Andean highlands but have settled to the Bolivian lowlands.
48. Author interview, October 27, 2008.
49. Morales, "Social Movements".
50. Author interview, October 27, 2008.
51. "Los sectores sociales".
52. República de Bolivia, "Dos Años del Gobierno", 9.
53. Postero, "Morales' MAS Government".
54. Gustafson, "When States Act".
55. Morales, "Social Movements", 82.
56. Author interview, January 7, 2009.
57. Lazar, *El Alto, Rebel City*; Morales, "Social Movements".
58. Morales, "Social Movements".
59. O'Donnell, "Corporatism", 48.
60. O'Donnell, "Corporatism", 48.
61. Lazar, *El Alto, Rebel City*.
62. Tapia, "El triple Descentramiento".
63. Lazar, *El Alto, Rebel City*, 250.
64. I refer to politicians and scholars whose views are publicly known to most Bolivians with their own names. I have anonymised all other interviewees in order to protect them from any potential harm. Author interview, December 22, 2008.
65. Morales, "Social Movements", 82.
66. Burman, "Now We Are Indígenas"; McNeish, "Extraction".
67. Rivera Cusicanqui, *Mito y Desarrollo*, 9, 47, 50–51.
68. Lalander, "Rights of Nature".
69. Burman, "Now We Are Indígenas".

70. Rivera Cusicanqui, *Mito y Desarrollo*, 44.
71. Burman, "Now We Are Indígenas", 261.
72. Rivera Cusicanqui, *Mito y Desarrollo*, 9, 58.
73. Author interview, October 24, 2008.
74. Indigenous autonomies have been extensively discussed elsewhere. See, for example, Tockman, "Decentralisation".
75. Author interview, January 29, 2009.
76. Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, *El Estado del Estado*, 485.
77. Author interview, January 14, 2009.
78. Vanden and Prevost, *Politics of Latin America*.
79. Author interview, January 27, 2009.
80. Harris, "The Dead", 48.
81. Harris, "The Dead", 68.
82. Author interview, January 13, 2009.
83. Bartolinas recolectan firmas.
84. Miranda, "Los Mentores y Viejos Aliados"; Miranda, "Cómo se Explica".
85. Rivera Cusicanqui, *Mito y Desarrollo*.

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